

The Four Gospels and Their Relation to the Church

by Harry Ironside

The Four Gospels are for our learning and apply to the present age, and the Church is built upon the Rock, the confession of the apostle Peter that Christ is the Son of the living God.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, Matthew 28:19, Romans 15:1-8

Topics: "Great Commission", "Relevance of the Gospels"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the relevance of the four Gospels to the Church today, countering the ultra-dispensationalist view that relegates them to a past dispensation. He argues that the teachings and principles found in the Gospels are essential for Christian behavior and moral responsibility in the present age. Ironside highlights that the life and ministry of Jesus serve as a model for believers, and the Great Commission remains a vital directive for the Church. He asserts that the Gospels, while rooted in Jewish context, provide timeless truths applicable to all believers, including Gentiles. Ultimately, he warns against dismissing the teachings of Christ as irrelevant, as they are foundational to understanding God's ongoing work in the world.

Transcript

HOWEVER they may differ in regard to minor details of their various systems, practically all ultra-dispensationalists are a unit in declaring that the four Gospels must be entirely relegated to a past dispensation (in fact, according to most of them, they are pushed two dispensations back), and, therefore, are not to be considered as in any sense applying to this present age. It is affirmed with the utmost assurance that the Gospels are wholly Jewish. Inasmuch as we are told in the Epistle to the Romans (15: 8), that "Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers," the position is taken that the records of the Evangelists deal solely with this phase of things, and that there is nothing even in the utterances of our Lord Himself in those books that has any special place for the present dispensation.

Yet a careful consideration of the very passage in which these words are found would seem to negative this entire theory and prove that it is absolutely groundless, for when the apostle is stressing true Christian behavior, he refers the saints back to the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus when here on earth. Notice the opening verses of Romans 15. We are told that the "strong should bear the infirmities of the weak, and

not seek to please themselves, but that each one should have in mine the edification of his neighbor," having Christ as our great example, "who pleased not Himself, but of whom it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached Thee fell on Me."

We are then definitely informed that not only what we have in the four Gospels, but what we have in all the Old Testament is for us, "for whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." Here there is no setting aside of an earlier revelation as though it had no message for the people of God in a later day simply because dispensations have changed. Spiritual principles never change; moral responsibility never changes, and the believer who would glorify God in the present age must manifest the grace that was seen in Christ when He walked here on earth during the age that is gone. It is perfectly true that He came in exact accord with Old Testament prophecy and came under the law, in order that He might deliver those who were under the law from that bondage. He was in reality a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, not-observe-to fulfil at His first coming the promises made unto the fathers, but to confirm them. This He did by His teaching and His example. He assures Israel even in setting them to one side, that the promises made beforehand shall yet have their fulfilment.

But, observe, it is upon this very fact that the apostle bases present grace going out to the Gentiles, for he adds in verse 9:

"And that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy; as it is written: For this cause I will confess to Thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto Thy name. And again He saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with His people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud Him, all ye people. And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a Root of Jesse, and He that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in Him shall the Gentiles trust" (vers. 9-12).

Here, while not for a moment ignoring that revelation of the mystery of which he speaks in the closing chapter, Paul shows that the present work of God in reaching out in grace to the Gentiles, is in full harmony with Old Testament Scripture, while going far beyond anything that the Old Testament prophets ever dreamed of, and then he adds:

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost" (ver. 13).

While there is a change of dispensation, there is no rude severing of Old Testament or Gospel revelation from that of the present age. The one flows naturally out of the other, and the ways of God are shown to be perfectly harmonious. This being so in connection with the Old Testament, how much more does the same principle apply in connection with the four Gospels. While fully recognizing their dispensational place, and realizing that our Lord is presented in the three Synoptics as offering Himself as King and the kingdom of Heaven as such to Israel, only to meet with ever-increasing rejection, yet it should be plain to any spiritual mind that the principles of the kingdom which He sets forth are the same principles that should hold authority over the hearts of all who acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. In John's Gospel the case is somewhat different, for there Christ is seen as the rejected One from the very beginning. It is in chapter one that we read, "He came unto His own and His own received Him not." Then based upon that, we have the new and fuller revelation which runs throughout that Gospel of grace, flowing out to all men who have no merit whatever in themselves.

But in Matthew, which is preeminently the dispensational Gospel, the Lord is presented as the Son of David first of all. Then when it is evident that Israel will refuse His claims, He is presented in the larger aspect of Son of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. The break with the leaders of the nation comes in chapter twelve, where they definitely ascribe the works of the Holy Spirit to the devil. In doing this, they become guilty of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, the crowning sin of that dispensation, which our Lord declares could not be forgiven either in that age or in the one to follow. In chapter thirteen, we have an altogether new ministry beginning. The Lord for the first time opens up the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, revealing things that had been kept secret from the foundation of the world, namely the strange and unlooked-for form that the kingdom would take here on earth after Israel had rejected the King and He had returned to Heaven. This is set forth in the seven parables of that chapter, and gives us the course of Christendom during all the present age.

As a rule, the ultra-dispensationalists would ignore all this and push these seven parables forward into the tribulation era after the Church, the Body of Christ, has been taken out of this scene. But this is to do violence to the entire Gospel and to ignore utterly the history of the past 1900 years. Just as in Revelation two and three we have an outline of the history of the professing Church presented under the similitude of the seven letters, so in Matthew 13 we have the course of Christendom in perfect harmony with the Church letters, portrayed in such a way as to make clear the distinction between the Church that man builds and that which is truly of God. In chapter sixteen of Matthew's Gospel, the Lord declares for the first time that He is going to build a Church or assembly. This assembly is to be built upon the Rock, the confession of the apostle Peter that Christ is the Son of the living God. How utterly vain it is to try to separate this declaration from the statement in the Ephesian Epistle where we read,

"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, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (2: 19-22).

Here in the preeminent prison epistle of which so much is made by the Bullingerites, you find that the Church then in existence is the Church our Lord spoke of building when He was here in the days of His flesh. The discipline of that Church is given in Matthew 18: 15-20:

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

In Matthew sixteen you have the assembly as a whole, comprising all believers during the present dispensation. Here in chapter eighteen, you have the local assembly in the position of responsibility on earth, and its authority to deal with evil-doers in corrective discipline.

The complete setting aside of Israel for the present age is given us in chapter 23: 37-39,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house -is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see Me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord."

In the light of the words, "Your house is left unto you desolate," how amazing the presumption that would lead any to declare, as practically all these extreme dispensationalists do declare, that Israel is being given a second trial throughout all the book of Acts, and that their real setting aside does not take place until Paul's meeting with the elders of the Jews after his imprisonment in Rome, as recorded in the last chapter of Acts. The fact of the matter is that the book of Acts opens with the setting aside of Israel until the day when they shall say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord." That is His second glorious coming. In the interval, God is saving out of Israel as well as of the Gentiles, all who turn to Him in repentance.

In Matthew twenty-four, we are carried on to the days immediately preceding that time when the Son of Man shall appear in glory, and we find the people of Israel in great distress, but a remnant called His "elect" shall be saved in that day.

I pass purposely over chapter twenty-five as having no particular bearing on the outline, because a careful consideration of it would take more time and space than is here available. The closing chapters give us the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then the commission of His apostles. People who have never investigated Bullingerism and its kindred systems will hardly believe me when I say that even the great commission upon which the Church has acted for 1900 years, and which is still our authority for world-wide missions, is, according to these teachers, a commission with which we have nothing whatever to do, that has no reference to the Church at all, and that the work there predicted will not begin until taken up by the remnant of Israel in the days of the Great Tribulation. Yet such is actually the teaching. In view of this, let us carefully read the closing verses of the Gospel:

"Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (28: 16-20).

According to the Bullingeristic interpretation of this passage, we should have to paraphrase it somewhat as follows: "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto Me in heaven and earth, and after two entire dispensations have rolled by, I command that the remnant of Israel who shall be living two thousand or more years later, shall go out and teach the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them in that day to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, but from which I absolve all believers between the present hour and that coming age, and lo, I will be with that remnant until the close of Daniel's seventieth week." Can anything be more absurd, more grotesque-and I might add, more wicked-than thus to twist and misuse the words of our Lord Jesus Christ?

In view of all this, may I direct my reader's careful attention to the solemn statement of the apostle Paul, which is found in I Timothy, chapter 6. After having given a great many practical exhortations to Timothy as to the instruction he was to give to the churches for their guidance during all the present age, the apostle says,

"If any man teach otherwise and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ' and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself" (I Tim. 6:3-5).

One would almost think that this was a direct command to Timothy to beware of Bullingerism! Notice, Timothy is to withdraw himself from, that is, to have no fellowship with, those who refuse the present authority of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. Where do you get those actual words? Certainly in the four Gospels. There are very few actual words of the Lord Jesus Christ scattered throughout the rest of the New Testament. Of course there is a sense in which all the New Testament is from Him, but the apostle is clearly referring here to the actual spoken words of our Saviour, which have been recorded for the benefit of the saints, and which set forth the teaching that is in accordance with godliness or practical piety. If a man refuses these words, whether on the plea that they do not apply to our dispensation, or for any other reason, the Spirit of God declares it is an evidence of intellectual or spiritual pride. Such men ordinarily think they know much more than others, and they look down from their fancied heights of superior Scriptural understanding with a certain contempt, often not untinged with scornful amusement, upon godly men and women who are simply seeking to take the words of the Lord Jesus as the guide for their lives.

But here we are told that such "know nothing," but are really in their spiritual dotage, "doting about questions and strifes of words." The dotard is generally characterized by frequent repetition of similar expressions. We know how marked this symptom is in those who have entered upon a state of physical and intellectual senility. Spiritual dotage may be discerned in the same way. A constant dwelling upon certain expressions as though these were all important, to the ignoring of the great body of truth, is an outstanding symptom. The margin, it will be observed, substitutes the word "sick" for "doting;" "word-sickness" is an apt expression. The word-sick man over-estimates altogether the importance of terms. He babbles continually about expressions which many of his brethren scarcely understand. He is given to misplaced emphasis, making far more of fine doctrinal distinctions than of practical godly living. As a result, his influence is generally baneful instead of helpful, leading to strife and disputation instead of binding the hearts of the people of God together in the unity of the Spirit.

The well-known passage in the closing chapter of Mark's Gospel, which gives us another aspect of the great commission, having to do particularly with the apostles, is a favorite battleground with the ultra-dispensationalists. Ignoring again the entire connection, they insist that the commission given in verses fifteen and eighteen could only apply during the days of the book of Acts, inasmuch as certain signs were to follow them that believe. As the commission in Matthew has been relegated by them to the Great Tribulation after the Christian age has closed, this one is supposed to have had its fulfilment before the present mystery dispensation began, and so has no real force now. They point out, what to them seems conclusive, that in this commission, as of course that in Matthew, water baptism is evidently linked with a profession of faith in Christ. They are perfectly hydrophobic as to this. The very thought of water sets them foaming with indignation. There must on no account be any recognition of water baptism during the present age. It must be gotten rid of at all costs. So here where we read that our Lord said, "Go ye into

all the world and preach the gospel to every creature; he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16: 15,16), which would seem to indicate world-wide evangelism, looking out to the proclamation of the glad glorious Gospel of God to lost men everywhere, this commission must nevertheless be gotten rid of somehow. The way they do it is this: The Lord declares that certain signs shall follow when this Gospel is proclaimed. These signs evidently followed in the days of the Acts. They declare they have never followed since. Therefore, it is evident that water baptism is only to go on so long as the signs follow. If the signs have ceased, then water baptism ceases. The signs are not here now, therefore no water baptism. How amazingly clear (!!), though, as we shall see in a moment, absolutely illogical. The signs accompanied preaching the Gospel. Why continue to preach if such signs are not now manifest?

The Matthew commission makes it plain that baptism in the name of the Trinity is to go on to the end of the age, and that age has not come to an end yet, whatever changes of dispensation may have come in. Now what of this commission in Mark? Observe first of all that our Lord is not declaring that the signs shall follow believers in the Gospel which is to be proclaimed by the Lord's messengers. The signs were to follow those of the apostles who believed, and they did. There were some of them who did not believe. See verse eleven: "And they, when they had heard that He was alive and had been seen of her, believed not." Then again, notice verse thirteen: "They went and told it unto the residue; neither believed they them." And in the verse that follows, we read: "Afterward He appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen Him after He was risen." Now our Lord commissions the eleven, sends them forth to go to the ends of the earth preaching the Gospel to every creature. There is nothing limited here. It is not a Jewish commission. It has nothing to do with the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. It is a world-wide commission to go to all the Gentiles, and to go forth preaching the Word. Responsibility rests upon those who hear. They are to believe and be baptized. Those who do are recognized among the saved. On the other hand, He does not say, "He that is not baptized shall be damned," because baptism was simply an outward confession of their faith, but He does say, "He that believeth not shall be damned."

Then in verses seventeen and eighteen, we have what Paul later called "the signs of an apostle."

"These signs shall follow them that believe: In My name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

During all the period of the book of Acts, these signs did follow the apostles. More than that, if we can place the least reliance upon early Church history, the same signs frequently followed other servants of Christ, as they went forth in obedience to this commission, and this long after the imprisonment of the apostle Paul. We should expect this from the closing verses of Mark:

"So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the Word with signs following" (Mark 16:19,20).

In this last verse, Mark covers the evangelization of the world (not merely a message going out to the Jews), during all the years that followed until the last of the apostles, John himself, had disappeared from the scene. I do not mean to intimate that Mark knew this, but I do mean that the Spirit of God caused him so to write this closing verse as to cover complete apostolic testimony right on to its consummation. They

preached everywhere, not simply in connection with Israel. Yet in the face of this, the statement has been made over and over again by these ultradispensationalists, that the twelve never went to the Gentiles, excepting in the case of the apostle Peter and a few similar instances. The statement has also been made that all miracles ceased with Paul's imprisonment, that there were no miracles afterwards. What superb ignorance of Church history is here indicated, and what an absurd position a man puts himself in who commits himself to negatives like these! An eminent logician has well said, "Never commit yourself to a negative, for that supposes that you are in possession of all the facts." If a man says there were no miracles wrought in the Church after the imprisonment of the apostle Peter, it means, if that statement is true, that he has thorough knowledge of all that has taken place in every land on earth where the Gospel has been preached, in all the centuries since the days of Paul's imprisonment, and knows all the work that every servant of Christ has ever done. Otherwise he could not logically and rationally make such a statement.

What then is the conclusion? It is wrongly dividing the Word of Truth to seek to rob Christians of the precious instruction given by our Lord Jesus in the four Gospels, though fully recognizing their dispensational place. It is an offense against Christian missions everywhere to try to set aside the great commission for the entire present age. It is not true that a definite limit is placed in Scripture upon the manifestation of sign gifts, and that such gifts have never appeared since the days of the apostles.

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