

What is the "Mystery of Christ?"

by Richie Temple
Cary, North Carolina

The "gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24) was the fundamental "gospel of salvation" (Eph. 1:13) that was preached by the original apostles and believers of the first century church and remains today as the bedrock or foundation of the new covenant Christian faith (I Cor. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:20). This gospel message of "salvation by grace" through faith in Jesus Christ had been foretold in the prophets of the OT scriptures and promised before to Abraham and his seed (Rom. 1:2; Gal. 3:8). It became effective through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost - thus, inaugurating the new covenant era of salvation (Luke 22:14-20; Acts 2; I Cor. 11:17-34; II Cor. 3:1-6, Heb. 9:11-15, etc.). Included in the Old Testament prophecy concerning this gospel was the truth that one day even Gentiles would turn to the God of Israel and receive his blessings (Rom. 15:9-12). However, one particular "mystery" or "secret" regarding this gospel message had been "hidden in God for ages and generations" until it was finally "revealed" to Paul, and then, to the other apostles and prophets of the new covenant church (Eph. 3:2-5).

Though there are several "mysteries" that are revealed in the NT letters of Paul (e.g. I Cor. 15:51; Rom. 11:25), this particular "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4) related specifically to the following truth: through believing the "gospel" (Eph. 3:6: cf. 1:13) *Gentile* believers in Christ now become *equal* "heirs together, members together of one body and partakers together" with believing Israelites "in the promise in Christ" (Eph. 3:6) - i.e. in the covenant promise originally made to Abraham and his seed and now fulfilled "in Christ" (cf. Gal. 3 and Rom. 4). Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians set out these truths concerning this mystery:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - Surely you have heard about the administration [Gr. oikonomia] of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to

understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration [Gr. oikonomia] of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (Eph. 3:1-12).

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission [Gr. oikonomia] God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness - the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:24-27).

In each case above the particular aspect of the mystery that is revealed "to the saints" (i.e. God's holy people) regards benefits to *Gentiles* who believe the gospel that had previously only been thought to be for believing Jews. That there would one day be a new covenant church was certainly not a mystery; however, this promise was made specifically to "the house of Israel" (Jer. 31:31). How then could *Gentile* believers in Christ be

included in the full blessings promised to God's new covenant people that had come into effect through Christ's death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit? Was it only through first becoming a proselyte to Judaism via circumcision and the other requirements of the Mosaic Law? These were the questions that caused much debate within the first century church (See Acts 15; Book of Galatians, etc.)

But the resolution of the problem came through a special revelation that had been "hidden in God from ages and generations." Through faith in the gospel message (Eph. 3:6), and the corresponding reception of the Spirit (Gal. 3), *Gentile* believers in Christ now become "heirs together, members together and full partakers together" with Jewish believers in all of God's covenant promises now available "in Christ." "In Christ" all barriers - legal, ethnic, social, etc. - between Jews and Gentiles had been broken down and abolished so as to establish an absolute equality of membership in the new covenant people of God. In short, "Christ is all and is in all" (Col. 3:11) thus making us all "one [new man] in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

We must remember that originally in the early chapters of Acts the new covenant church was made up of only Jewish believers or proselytes to Judaism from among the Gentiles. These believers understood, correctly, that the coming of Christ was in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that had been made to Abraham and his seed. But they did not understand that Gentile believers in Christ were to be included in the seed of Abraham by virtue of being included on an equal basis "in Christ." To think that they could now be admitted into the new covenant people of God on an equal basis with Jewish believers so as to become one organic body, without first becoming Jews (i.e. via circumcision, etc.), was a revolutionary truth indeed to the first century church - so revolutionary in fact that it turned not only the Roman world, but also their own Jewish world, upside down!

Is the Mystery a Period of Time that had Been Hidden in God?

One common misconception regarding this topic of the mystery is that it is the subject of a special period of time. That is to say, a special

period of time that had been kept secret in God until it was revealed to the apostle Paul. This misunderstanding stems from confusion regarding the Greek word translated as "administration" (NIV) or "dispensation" (KJV) in Eph. 3: 2, 9, etc. This word is the Greek word *oikonomia* and it has two closely related meanings in normal Greek usage: (1) the administration or arrangement of a household; (2) the stewardship of the one who administers it. In the Bible, however, when *oikonomia* is applied to the things of God it always refers either to the *administrative plan or arrangement* of a particular aspect of God's plan of salvation or to the *stewardship* of the one who is responsible for making this plan known. As with all words, the exact meaning of each occurrence of *oikonomia* is determined by the context in which it is used.

It is important to emphasize, however, that *oikonomia* never refers to a period of time. This common misconception is important to correct and *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* does so in a special note under the word "Dispensation" (Gr. *oikonomia*):

Note: A dispensation is not a period or epoch (a common, but erroneous, use of the word), but a mode of dealing, an arrangement or administration of affairs (p. 312).

Though many Bible believing "dispensationalist" groups insist that the mystery was a special period of time that was "hidden in God" - and is now in effect *in between* God's separate dealings with Jews and Gentiles - this understanding can find no support on the basis of the Greek word *oikonomia*. Certainly *the truths* made known concerning the mystery *are* now in effect but the terms "administration of God's grace" (v. 2 NIV) and the "administration of the mystery" (v. 9 NIV) do not mean that Paul is referring to a secret *period of time* that was hidden in God. Instead, the mystery reveals *specific truths*, previously hidden, about God's plan of salvation *in* the new covenant era - an era which had been previously foretold in the OT and has been in effect since Pentecost.

The Greek word *oikonomia* in Eph. 3:2 and Col. 1:25 most likely refers to the "commission, or stewardship" (NRSV, NAB) that was given to Paul in setting forth or preaching the mystery to others. It

could, however, refer to God's "administrative arrangement, or plan" as set forth in the truths of the mystery itself (i.e. Eph. 3:6). This is what the NIV means by its use of the word "administration" as can be seen by checking the notes of the *NIV Study Bible*. In Eph. 3:9 *oikonomia* probably refers to God's administrative "plan" of the mystery (NRSV, NAB, cf. NIV, etc.). In all of these cases it is difficult to be absolutely sure of the exact sense intended but since the "plan" was "entrusted" to Paul it ultimately comes out the same. Concerning Eph. 3:2 Frances Foulkes states that Paul is "thinking especially of the stewardship entrusted to him (cf. I Cor. 4:1; 9:17), though the other thought of arrangement or purpose of God is not far away" (*Tyndale NT Commentaries, Ephesians*, p. 98). J.D.G. Dunn also comments on the proper understanding of *oikonomia* in his commentary on Colossians:

The noun [*oikonomia*] would normally designate the administration or stewardship carried out by the *oikonomos* ("steward or administrator" of an estate). But Paul applied the language to his own work: he saw himself as commissioned by his master, like a good steward having received his orders in his master's absence; hence I Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2 and Col. 1:25. The thought is already developing into the fuller and still more distinctive idea of "God's plan of salvation" (as in Eph. 1:10; 3:9) [*The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, Eerdmans*, p. 118].

The different possibilities for translating each occurrence of *oikonomia* by Bible translators is reflected in the wide variety of renderings of this word in the different versions of the Bible (see p. 14). The differences, however, do not cause a problem in the overall understanding of the subject of the mystery, they simply emphasize either the *plan* of the mystery itself or the *stewardship* of bringing its truth to others. In no case, however, does *oikonomia* ever refer to a period of time.

This is not to say, of course, that Paul and the other biblical writers did not view God's plan of salvation as being worked out by God's guiding and over-ruling hand through different phases or epochs of human history. Without any doubt God's dealings with mankind have differed according to the circumstances of the times and according to the specific phase of human history that was then in

effect. Such periods of time are clearly marked in the Bible in various ways (e.g. Rom. 5:12-14; Luke 16:16; Rom. 10:4; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:9-10; etc.). Joseph Fitzmeyer in his commentary *Romans* in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, p. 108-109) speaks directly to this issue:

God, the Creator, is presented [in Romans] as the author of a plan or "project" of salvation (*prothesis*, 8:28, 9:11), which accords with his "will" (1:10; 15:32) and his "predestination" of all things (8:28-30). This divine plan is concerned with human history and is now ordered to the salvation of his "people" ...

To this plan of salvation are related phases of human history, as Paul viewed them through Jewish spectacles. He knows of a phase "from Adam to Moses (Rom. 5:17; cf. Gal. 3:17) ... then of a phase from Moses to the Messiah (Gal. 3:19; Rom. 5:20) ... the phase of the Messiah, of Christ who is "the end of the law (Rom. 10:4) ... This phase, already begun, when "Christ died at the appointed time for the godless" (Rom. 5:6), perdues until the coming of "the day" of the Lord (Rom. 13:11-14).

Other biblical phases of time could include, for example, the larger epochs of "the present age" and "the age to come" (Eph. 1:21). However, none of these periods of time are ever called in the Bible an *oikonomia*. We can, on the other hand, speak of an *oikonomia* of the Old Covenant or of the New Covenant if by this we mean God's arrangement or administrative plan as set forth in them - but not in the sense of a period of time. This is the way *oikonomia* is used in Ephesians 1:10 where it speaks of God's administrative plan that will be "put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment." But, again, *oikonomia* does not refer here to the time period itself but to the administrative arrangement or plan that will be put into effect *at* that time.

When was the Mystery of Christ Revealed?

Another common misconception about the "mystery of Christ" regards the time at which this mystery was revealed. First, it should be immediately obvious that the "revelation" of the mystery (Eph. 3:3) did not come to Paul when he was imprisoned after the Book of Acts and only then

set forth by him in the prison epistles of Ephesians and Colossians. According to Eph. 6:19-20 and Col. 4:3 it was precisely *because* of preaching the "mystery of Christ" that Paul had been put in prison at the time in which he wrote these letters.

The word "now" in the passages of Eph. 3:5 and 10 has caused some confusion in this matter. However, the word "now" in these contexts does *not* mean that the revelation of the mystery was not made known until it was revealed to the apostle Paul while in prison (after the Book of Acts). Instead, the word "now" in these contexts refers to the "now" of "the new covenant era of salvation" in contrast to "ages past" or, as scholars often call it, "the eschatological now." It is often used in this sense in the NT, including in Paul's letters (cf. Acts 17:30; Rom. 3:21; II Cor. 6:2; Col. 1:22). In this case, Paul's usage is absolutely confirmed by Eph. 2:13, "But *now* in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Obviously, this did not occur only after the Book of Acts had ended nor was it only made known or revealed then.

At least as early as the letters to the Galatians and Romans this mystery had already been "made known to God's holy apostles and prophets" (Eph. 3:5) for the purpose of bringing the Gentiles "to the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16: 25-26). This is easy to see, not only from this verse, but by comparing the contents of the mystery, as set forth in Ephesians 3:6 and Colossians 1:24-27, with *the exact same truths* that are revealed and explained in the other NT letters of Paul - all of which were written well within the period outlined in the Book of Acts:

1. *Gentile* believers in Christ are:

"heirs together" with Jewish believers (Eph. 3:6; Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:1-4:7).

"members together of one body" with Jewish believers (Eph. 3:6; Rom. 12:4-5; I Cor. 12:12-27).

"sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" with Jewish believers (Eph. 3:6; Gal. 3; Rom. 9-11).

2. *Gentile* believers in Christ:

have "Christ in you, the hope of glory" along with Jewish believers (Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:10; Gal. 2:20).

When then did Paul receive this "revelation" (Eph. 3:3) about the mystery? Most scholars believe

it was at the time of the Damascus road "revelation of Jesus Christ" (cf. Gal. 1:11-16) as recorded in Acts 9 and elsewhere. This seems to be implicit in Paul's own account to King Agrippa concerning Paul's apostolic commission to the Gentiles as recorded in Acts 26:

Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place (gr. kleron = "inheritance," cf. Eph. 3:6 "sunkleronoma = "heirs-together") among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:15-18).

Simply put, as can be seen from the above sections of scripture both in Acts and the other Pauline epistles, the truths of the mystery were from the very beginning of Paul's apostolic commission part and parcel of the "gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24) that he preached. It took some time, however, for the other "apostles and prophets" to come to this same understanding "through the Spirit" (Cp. Eph. 3:5; Acts 10, 15 and Gal. 1-3).

God's Eternal Purpose "in Christ"

The new covenant era of salvation began on the day of Pentecost and the "gospel of God's grace" presents the message of salvation inherent in the new covenant truths. The effects of Christ's death and resurrection are "once for all" and the "mystery of Christ," now revealed, of bringing Gentile believers together with Jewish believers into "one new man in Christ" is the focal point of God's "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11) that he has been working out since before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3-10). Far from being a special period of time *in between* God's separate dealings with Jews and Gentiles, this creation of a new humanity "in Christ" is God's ultimate goal for the human race. "In Christ" all

barriers between human beings with each other, as well as between mankind and God, have been forever broken down and abolished. Never again will God deal with mankind on any other basis than by what he has now accomplished "in Christ."

In fact, so wonderful is this unity of believing Jews and Gentiles "in Christ" that the book of Ephesians shows it to be a *preview* or *foretaste* to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 3:10) of the final stage of "the mystery of God's will" - to be accomplished at Christ's return - "to bring *all things* in heaven and on earth [i.e. spiritual beings and human beings] together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:9-10).

F.F. Bruce sets forth the cosmic significance of these verses in his commentary on *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* in the *New Int. Comm. on the NT* (Eerdman's, pp. 319-322):

... the church fellowship in which Gentile and Jewish believers were united was no mere enrollment on a register of membership; it involved their union with Christ by faith and therefore their union with each other as fellow-members of his body. The "third race" was coming visibly to life: something that had not been seen or imagined before was now a matter of experience. Before all ages God's undisclosed purpose had existed in his own mind; now its accomplishment was evident not only to human beings on earth but also "to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realm ... "

The "principalities and powers" learn from the church that they too have a place in the plan of God. The reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles in this new creation is a token of the reconciliation in which they in their turn are to be embraced. In Col. 1:19-22 the cosmic reconciliation which God has planned is anticipated in the experience of believers in Christ, whom "he has now reconciled" - and the means of reconciliation in the one case as in the other is the saving work of Christ, who has "made peace through the blood of the cross." The church thus appears to

be God's pilot scheme for the reconciled universe of the future, the mystery of God's will "to be administered in the fullness of times," when "the things in heaven and the things on earth" are brought together in Christ (Eph. 1:9-10).

The divine purpose, to be consummated in Christ, was originally conceived in him. Jewish and Gentile believers who have now been reconciled in him were already chosen in him "before the world's foundation" (Eph. 1:4), and what is true of the church is true of the universe: its final reconciliation in Christ was decreed in Christ according to God's eternal purpose. And in the outworking of the "purpose of the ages" the people of Christ are given an essential part to play.

Those - whether Jew or Gentile - who freely respond by faith to "the gospel of God's grace" are now incorporated "into Christ" and become heirs together in God's eternal purpose - a purpose that was designed and accomplished "in Christ." In him, a new humanity is being formed who share in the destiny of all that God has prepared "for those who love him." To share in that destiny is to share in the God-ordained purpose of life itself - "to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6)

[There is wide agreement amongst the best NT scholars regarding the truths of the mystery of Christ. Highly recommended and simpler studies include the study notes in the *NIV Study Bible* and *The Tyndale NT Commentaries, Ephesians*, by Frances Foulkes. More detailed studies include: a commentary on *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* by F.F. Bruce in the *New International Commentary on the NT* series; *Ephesians*, by Andrew Lincoln in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series; and J.D.G. Dunn's commentary on *Colossians and Philemon* in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* series. All are available from CBD at ph. 1-508-977-5000]