

Making Known the Mystery in Ephesians

by John Pester

In the universe there is no greater mystery than the Triune God. He is hidden, secret, and seemingly unknowable. Even the Bible, whose primary purpose is to reveal and testify of Christ, who is the embodiment of the Triune God, seems cryptically, even disconcertingly, vague in its revelation of God (John 5:39; Luke 24:44; Col. 2:9). In its pages, we can trace His paths and even His ways, but in order to do so, we must find a little here and a little there (Isa. 28:13). In the Old Testament He is spoken of as a God who hides Himself, and in the New Testament He is said to dwell in unapproachable light (Isa. 45:15; 1 Tim. 6:16). Even Christ, the incarnation and manifestation of the eternal Word, often withdrew from the crowds in His public ministry (Matt. 14:13; Luke 5:16). And when He did speak of the mysteries of the kingdom of God, He spoke in parables so that seeing they might see and not perceive and hearing they might hear and not understand (Mark 4:12). His ministry lasted barely three and a half years, and much of it was conducted in Galilee, a despised region distant from the center of the religious life of Israel, far from the house that was built as His dwelling place. And yet, paradoxically, enigmatically, He can be found by those who do not seek Him and be made manifest to those who do not ask for Him (Rom. 10:20). Much is seemingly unknowable about our God, and yet with comforted hearts, He is intimately knowable to us (Col. 2:2). The confluence of the unknowable with the knowable is the essence of both mystery and the mysteries in God's economy.¹

The unfolding of the mysteries in the economy of God begins deep within the heart of the Triune God who, even though He is high and lifted up, has an eternal desire for a consummate manifestation of all that He is in Christ. He is a God who wills to make known the riches of the glory of His mysterious hidden purpose (Col. 1:27). In accordance with this purpose, He reveals the hidden content of His plan to those whose hearts have

been captured and gained by Christ. These stewards, in turn, enlighten all concerning the economy of the mystery. God's economy, His administrative plan, produces many sons who possess and partake of the life and nature of the Triune God and who constitute the organic Body of Christ, the church as the enlargement of the Triune God in Christ. Ultimately, according to the eternal purpose of God, the multifarious wisdom of God is made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies.

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of the mysteries in God's economy on many levels. Beginning with the mystery of God's will, he unveils the intrinsic essence of God's divine goal—the full expression of Christ through the church, which is His Body. He also stresses the economy of the mystery, God's administrative arrangement to achieve His goal. This arrangement involves the dispensing of the Triune God, who has passed through a process of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, into His chosen, redeemed, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect. The effective operation of this mysterious economy depends upon a revelation of the mystery, and so Paul also speaks of the pivotal role of revelation in Ephesians. Finally, our personal entrance into these mysteries is a function of the true condition of our heart before God, so throughout the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul reminds the believers of the place our heart has in the economical operation of the Triune God. With a spirit of wisdom and revelation and with the eyes of our heart fully enlightened, it is possible to experience the mysterious operation of God's economy for the ultimate consummation of the mystery of God's will. At the core of this mystery in its various aspects is an intrinsic desire within the Triune God, who in ages past was hidden and unknowable, to be made known, that is, fully expressed in and through Christ and the church. This is the mysterious calling of the believers that Paul unveils in Ephesians.

“The Mystery of His Will”

The believers’ calling is irrevocable because, according to His good pleasure, it originates in eternity past in God’s heart, and because, according to the counsel of His will, it is being mysteriously worked out in time. In Ephesians Paul speaks of mystery from many viewpoints, including the revelation of the mystery (3:3), the mystery of Christ (v. 4), the economy of the mystery (v. 9), the great mystery (5:32), and the mystery of the gospel (6:19), but he begins with a discussion of the mystery of His will (1:9). All of Paul’s subsequent development of the term *mystery* in Ephesians is based upon his understanding of the crucial phrase *the mystery of His will*. This is because the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose is the intrinsic motivation behind all of the economical realities that are implied in Paul’s references to the term *mystery* in Ephesians.

In order to fulfill the mystery of His will, the Triune God works all things according to the counsel of His will (1:11). The work to carry out His desired purpose involves an administrative arrangement, an economy; hence, there is an economy of the mystery (3:9). In this economy, the person and work of Christ are central; hence, the mystery of Christ and even the great mystery, Christ and the church, manifest the progressive accomplishment of God’s will (3:4; 5:32). The application of God’s accomplished will depends upon revelation; hence, there is a revelation of the mystery to the apostles and prophets in spirit (3:3, 5). There is also a need to announce the economical accomplishment of God’s will as the gospel; hence, there is the mystery of the gospel (6:19).

Understanding the mystery of His will, therefore, is the key to understanding the realities of the mysteries in God’s economy as they are revealed in Ephesians. And understanding the content of the mysteries is the key to experientially glimpsing the things which God predestined before the ages for our glory, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him, and the things that, without revelation, would never come up in our hearts (1 Cor. 2:7-9). Everything that is implied in the term *the mystery of His will*, including the grand sweep of His economy from eternity past to eternity future, can be traced back to God’s heart’s desire for many sons who, possessing His life and nature, are organically joined to His Beloved as the members of His Body to jointly inherit and express the Triune God Himself.

Sonship

When Paul first speaks of the mystery of God’s will in Ephesians 1:9, it is within the broader framework of his discussion of God’s will in verses 4 and 5. The phrase *the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure* in verse 9 is related directly to the phrase *the good pleasure of His will* in verse 5. God’s good pleasure, the desire of His heart, is the motivating factor in the exercise of His will. The Triune God desires to be fully expressed in and through the Son, and so the Father predestinated us unto sonship. We have been chosen to be holy and without blemish before Him in love. Sonship involves both our constitution with God’s holy nature and our enjoyment of His intimate presence. In our chosen and privileged position in Christ, we will fully match God’s divine standard and fully enjoy Him in His intimate presence. Through our identification with the Son, who is the source of grace, we also will be to the praise of the glory of His grace. In eternity past the Father predestinated us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, and in time we are being constituted with His holy nature and enjoying Him by being graced in the Beloved (vv. 5-6).

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Paul’s concept of sonship involves much more than just an objective, judicial recognition of the believers as sons. This is a common understanding of many Christians, an understanding that is reinforced by translations of the Greek word *huiiothesia* which employ the term *adoption*. For example, the

New American Standard Bible translates *huiiothesia* with the phrase *adoption as sons*, and the King James Version translates it *adoption of children*. The Greek word literally means to place in the position of a son. In order to be placed in the position of a privileged son, there is a need for growth and advancement in the divine life. Sonship involves regeneration with the divine life of the Triune God (John 1:4, 12-13), and it also involves the mature expression of life which issues forth from the growth of the divine life. Even though W. E. Vine utilizes the term *adoption*, he points out a distinction between regeneration and growth in life in his critique of *adoption of children* in Ephesians 1:5.

In Eph. 1:5 they [the believers] are said to have been foreordained unto “adoption as sons” through Jesus Christ, R.V.: the A.V., “adoption of children” is a mistranslation and misleading. God does not adopt believers as children; they are begotten as such by His Holy Spirit through faith. Adoption is a term involving the dignity of the relationship of believers as sons; it is not a putting

into the family by spiritual birth, but a putting into the position of sons. (34)

The distinction between children and sons is more clearly discussed in a footnote to verse 5 in the Recovery Version of the New Testament:

God's marking us out beforehand was to destine us unto sonship. We were predestinated to be sons of God even before we were created. Hence, as God's creatures we need to be regenerated by Him that we may participate in His life to be His sons. Sonship implies having not only the life but also the position of a son. God's marked-out ones have the life to be His sons and the position to inherit Him. To be made holy—to be sanctified by God by His putting Himself into us and then mingling His nature with us—is the process, the procedure, whereas to be sons of God is the aim, the goal, and is a matter of our being joined to the Son of God and conformed to a particular form or shape, the very image of the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15). (Note 2)

Paul's thought concerning sonship in Ephesians is reflected and developed elsewhere in his Epistles, particularly in Romans, which specifically shows the progression in life from children to sons to heirs in chapter eight. In the initial stage of life, the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God (v. 16). When we believed, our human spirit was born of the divine Spirit (John 3:6); thus, the Spirit can and does witness with our spirit that we are children of God. This inward witnessing of the Spirit is present within every believer.² As children of God, however, there is a need to grow in life by cooperating with the operation of the law of the Spirit of life to walk according to our regenerated human spirit and to mind the things of the Spirit. As the believers are led by the Spirit of God, a further stage in the growth in life becomes manifest. Paul states, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery bringing you into fear again, but you have received a spirit of sonship in which we cry, Abba, Father!" (Rom. 8:14-15). The ultimate manifestation of the growth in life is the emergence of the sons of God as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (v. 17).

The central thought of the book of Romans is that God's salvation makes sinners His sons, who have His life and nature so that they can express Him, that they may become members of Christ to constitute the Body of Christ for His expression. Hence, sonship is stressed in this chapter (vv. 15, 23). *Sons* here [verse 14] indicates a more advanced stage of growth in the divine life than does *children* in v. 16, yet not as advanced as *heirs* in v. 17. *Children* refers to the initial stage of sonship, the stage of regeneration in the human spirit. Sons are the children of God who are in the stage of the transformation of their souls. They not only have been regenerated in their spirit and

are growing in the divine life, but they also are living and walking by being led by the Spirit. Heirs are the sons of God who, through the transfiguration of their body in the stage of glorification, will be fully matured in every part of their being. Hence, they will be qualified as the legal heirs to claim the divine inheritance (vv. 17, 23). (Recovery Version, v. 14, note 3)

All of creation is anxiously watching and eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God (v. 19), which is according to God's predestination. This revelation involves the redemption of our bodies. Paul links the redemption of our bodies with the term *sonship* in verse 23, further strengthening the thought that sonship is related to the mature expression of the divine life.

The goal of sonship will be realized because "those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son" (v. 29). Paul's utterance in verse 29 reflects his word in Ephesians 1:5 that the believers have been predestinated unto sonship. In Romans 8:28 Paul speaks of the Triune God arranging all things to work together for good to those who have been called according to His purpose, and in Ephesians 1:11, he speaks of "the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will." In both Romans 8 and Ephesians 1, God's will relates to His desire for many sons who bear the image of His Son, corporately expressing the divine life of the Triune God in the fullness of its maturity. Corporate sonship is the goal of God's predestination; it is the goal toward which all of His actions are purposefully directed.

In contrast to much of today's Christianity, Paul's discussion of mystery and sonship in Ephesians is not framed in terms of individualistic spiritual pursuit, but rather in terms of the believers' corporate participation in the Body of Christ. It is quite easy to view the blessings in Ephesians 1 as individual blessings, and it is not uncommon for Christian teachings to present these blessings as matters for individualistic pursuit.³ The goal of sonship in verse 5, however, is not many spiritual individuals, but rather the Body of Christ in verse 23. According to the good pleasure of His will, the operation of the Triune God produces the Body of Christ as the fullness of the One who fills all in all. In the Body of Christ, there is both maturity in the divine life and the proper exercise of God's authority. Only the Body of Christ displays the reality inherent in the notion of sonship, and only the Body of Christ consummates the mystery of His will.

Fellow Heirs, Fellow Members, and Fellow Partakers

The relationship between the mystery of God's will and the Body of Christ is developed further in chapter three when Paul presents his understanding of the mystery of Christ.

In describing the mystery of Christ, he states that “in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise through the gospel” (v. 6). Although the Body is directly referenced only in relation to Jews and Gentiles being fellow members of the Body, the term *fellow* in association with *heirs* and *partakers* also implies the Body. On the cross Christ brought those who were far off near in His blood, and He broke down the middle wall of partition, the enmity, between Jews and Gentiles by abolishing in His flesh the law of the commandments in ordinances (2:13-15). Through His redeeming death, He reconciled both Jews and Gentiles in one Body, creating the two in Himself into one new man and making peace (vv. 15-16). Coming as the Spirit in resurrection, He announced this peace as the gospel so that now through Him both Jews and Gentiles have access in one Spirit unto the Father (vv. 17-18). The believers jointly inherit God and jointly partake of the promise by virtue of being members of the Body of Christ.

The sonship that Paul speaks of in 1:5 is realized in the Body of Christ. In the Body of Christ, the members realize their chosen position in the Son, and Christ is manifested and enlarged through the members. In the Body of Christ, God’s will is fulfilled, and the deep desire of His heart is satisfied. There is an intrinsic connection between sonship and the Body of Christ, just as there is an intrinsic connection between the mystery of Christ and the mystery of God’s will. The content of the mystery of Christ unfolds the mystery of God’s will according to God’s economy, just as the Body of Christ imbues the concept of sonship with its vital reality.

Making Known the Unknowable Triune God

The desire that motivates the Triune God, including the Father’s selection and predestination, the Son’s redemption, and the Spirit’s sealing and pledging, is fully realized in the manifestation of the Body of Christ. In many respects, it is the desire of the Triune God to be made known, rather than the manifestation which makes Him known, that reveals the intrinsic essence of the mysteries in God’s economy. Within the Triune God, there is the desire, the will, and the way to make Himself known. Even though the Triune God is unknown to many,⁴ He desires to be known by all. What can be more mysterious than the making known of the unknowable Triune God? He desires to be made known to the rulers and authorities (3:10). He also desires to be made known through the church by im-

parting His life and nature into His chosen and redeemed, by being organically joined to them, and by filling them unto all the fullness of God (v. 19).

The fullness of God implies that the riches of all that God is have become His expression. When the riches of God are in God Himself, they are His riches. But when the riches of God are expressed, they become His fullness (John 1:16). All the fullness of God dwells in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9). Through His indwelling, Christ imparts the fullness of God into our being that we may be filled even unto the fullness of God to be the practical manifestation of the church, in which God may be glorified in His expression (v. 21). (Recovery Version, v. 19, note 1)

In eternity past the Triune God, desiring the fullest expression of Himself, envisioned the Body of Christ as His masterpiece (2:10), and then He began to steadfastly work toward the accomplishment of this goal. The Body of Christ, as the fullness of the One who fills all in all (1:23), is a masterpiece that will display, not only the ac-

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complishment of God’s heart’s desire but also all that God is in Christ. In His mysterious economy, the Body of Christ is in the process of arriving at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (4:13). We arrive at the reality of this oneness, not by doctrinal disputation or by objective fealty to statements, accords, or

creeds, but rather by experiencing the riches of Christ as grace in our mingled human spirit. “The fullness of Christ issues from the enjoyment of the riches of Christ (3:8). Through the enjoyment of Christ’s riches, we become His fullness to express Him” (Recovery Version, 1:23, note 2).

Paul’s use of the term *fullness* in 1:23, 3:19, and 4:13 underscores God’s mysterious desire for expression. In its very essence, *fullness* implies expression. When the fullness of God is expressed through the Body of Christ, the Triune God will be fully known by all. The rulers and authorities will know (3:10), the nations will know (Rev. 21:3; 24), and the redeemed, transformed, and glorified elect, the constituents of the Body of Christ will fully know and see Him as He is (1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2). “Since we are the children of God, we will be like Him in the maturity of life when He is manifested.... We will not only have the divine nature but will also bear the divine likeness” (Recovery Version, 1 John 3:2, note 1). In our bearing of the divine likeness, the multifarious wisdom of

God will be made known through the church, according to God's eternal purpose (Eph. 3:10).

The making known of the Triune God in His full expression is a matter of glory. Glory is simply God expressed, and Paul prominently and frequently speaks of glory in Ephesians.⁵ In Colossians 1:27, Paul refers to even the "riches of the glory of this mystery," indicating that the mysteries in God's economy are ultimately related to glory, the full expression of God in Christ. Through the Father's selection and predestination, the Son's redemption, and the Spirit's sealing and pledging, the church will be to the praise of the glory of His grace, and there will be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations forever and ever.

According to Colossians 1:27, God has willed to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery; that is, He has willed to make known that which makes Him known, that which fully expresses Him. This is simply and preeminently Christ, but not Christ apart from the members of His Body. Instead, it is the Christ who currently indwells the members of His Body and who will shine out from the glorified bodies of His corporate Body at the time of His coming back.

Christ, who dwells in our spirit to be our life and person, is our hope of glory. When He comes, we will be glorified in Him. This indicates that the indwelling Christ will saturate our entire being that our physical body may be transfigured and conformed to the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21). (Recovery Version, Col. 1:27, note 3)

The riches of the glory of the mystery of God's will are related to Christ who dwells in us as the hope of glory.⁶ In *The Ephesian Mysterion*, Chrys C. Caragounis underscores the importance of glory in relationship to mystery in Ephesians, by pointing to Paul's threefold reference to *glory* in Ephesians 1:6, 12, and 14.

Its repetition is significant since this is the only collocation of so many words that occurs more than once in this passage. Furthermore the 'final' prep [*eis*] indicates that this phrase, far from being intended as a mere flourish in an already ornate style, supplies the purpose upon which all of God's undertakings, described in the Eulogy, hinge. It is the supreme end in view for the sake of which God does all that He does....I am here suggesting that for the author of Eph the election and redemption of man are not an end in themselves, but rather as means to an end. Even the towering concept of a cosmic *anakephalaiōsis* is not the final purpose, but a prerequisite to God's glory. (138-139)

Throughout eternity future there will be an enlarged expression of the Triune God in the church and in Christ Jesus. In eternity past there was only the Triune God, but

in eternity future there will be an enlarged expression of the Triune God through Christ and the church, the Head and the Body. The end result of God's choosing is God's glorification: "Those whom He predestinated,...these He also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). When God is glorified, God is made known. The mystery of God's will produces glory, and in this glory, God is expressed. In order for the church to be presented to Christ in glory and to be to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. 5:27; 1:6, 12, 14), the God of glory must be fully wrought into His chosen and redeemed. The glory of God can never be separated from God; it is one of His essential attributes. Consequently, when the glory of God is revealed into us, as joint heirs with the Christ of God, in reality it will be the God of glory who is revealed in us (Rom. 8:17-18). This glorious issue of the economy of God will mark our full conformation to the image of His Son (v. 29), our full attainment of sonship, as the consummation of God's mysterious will.

"The Economy of the Mystery"

In order to consummate the mystery of God's will, there is the need for a plan, an administrative arrangement, an economy. The accomplishment of God's will is mysterious, and the economy that accomplishes His will also is mysterious. Consequently, Paul speaks of enlightening all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is (Eph. 3:9). While *the economy of the mystery* in 3:9 points back to both the mystery of Christ in verse 4 and the mystery of His will in 1:9, it refers more directly to Paul's utterance concerning the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ (v. 10).

The Greek word, *oikonomia*, means *house law, household management or administration*, and derivatively, *administrative dispensation, plan, economy*....The economy that God, according to His desire, planned and purposed in Himself is to head up all things in Christ at the fullness of the times. This is accomplished through the dispensing of the abundant life supply of the Triune God as the life factor into all the members of the church that they may rise up from the death situation and be attached to the Body. (Recovery Version, Eph. 1:10, note 1)

The heading up of all things in Christ, which is a succinct summary of the consummation of the mystery of God's will, is according to God's economical plan.⁷

The Eph *mysterion*, therefore, is not only the cosmic *anakephalaiōsis* [the heading up of all things] and the unification of Jews and Gentiles, it is not only God's eternal plan, but also the outworking of that plan as well as its effective declaration by the author. (Caragounis 140)

The economy of the mystery encompasses both the

content of God's plan, which is sourced in the heart of God in eternity past, and the operation of His plan, which is effectively worked out in time.

Just as there is a specific goal in God's plan, there is a specific process to work out this plan. The Triune God is fully engaged in this process because only the divine life of the Triune God has the capacity to enliven those who were dead in offenses and sins and to join those who were utterly divided into one Body (2:1, 16). Apart from the Triune God being dispensed and imparted as life into those whom He has chosen and redeemed, the glorification of the Triune God in and through Christ and the church—the goal of our participation in the mysteries in God's economy—could not be achieved. The Triune God must be dispensed into redeemed humanity because it is the Triune God who shines out of glorified humanity.

The Triune God is dispensed according to His economy, and the operation of the divine economy involves the Divine Trinity. In order to accomplish God's eternal purpose—the Father's selection and predestination of the believers unto sonship—there is the need for redemption. According to God's way, however, redemption requires death, and death requires a body. In order to accomplish redemption, therefore, it was necessary for God to become a man through the incarnation of the Son in humanity. The incarnation is also important because in the human living of Jesus, a proper pattern of the living of a God-man, which is the reality of the living of the Triune God in man, was established and made available to the believers (4:21).

In the godly life of Jesus there is truth, reality. Jesus lived a life in which He did everything in God, with God, and for God. God was in His living, and He was one with God. This is what is meant by *the reality is in Jesus*. We, the believers, who are regenerated with Christ as our life and are taught in Him, learn from Him as the reality is in Jesus. (Recovery Version, note 1)

In His human living the Son passed through death, shedding His blood for our redemption and acquiring us for God as His possession (1:7, 14). He also entered into resurrection, imparting His enlivening life as the life-giving Spirit and capturing us for His Body (2:5; 4:8). In resurrection He has come as the Spirit, announcing the peace He accomplished on the cross and imparting Himself as both a seal and a pledge into our regenerated human spirit (2:17; 1:13-14). The Triune God is now in us, supplying

us with the surpassing greatness of His power, according to the operation of the might of His strength, which experientially brings us into the resurrecting, ascending, subjecting, and heading up power of Christ (vv. 19-22).

In all the stages of this process, the Triune God has been progressively revealed and made known. In His incarnation, the Son, as the embodiment of the Triune God, made the Triune God known to man, particularly in His human living. Through the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son and through His descension as the Spirit, the Triune God has been imparted into the chosen believers, making it possible for the multifarious wisdom of God to be known through the church, the Body of Christ whom He indwells. The economy of God reveals that the Triune God has been processed in His Trinity so that He can be imparted into man's human spirit and be thoroughly mingled with His chosen and redeemed elect. Through the economy of God, the mysterious Triune God is made known in a full way.

The glorification of the Triune God in and through Christ and the church cannot be achieved without the Triune God being dispensed into redeemed humanity, because it is the Triune God who shines out of glorified humanity.

“By Revelation the Mystery Was Made Known”

Even though the Triune God has passed through a mysterious economical process to be dispensed into humanity, this is not enough to fully make known the mystery of His will. The effective operation of this economy in the believers depends also upon revelation. There must be revelation from God, and there must be speak-

ing and teaching to humanity. Thus, there is a need for faithful stewards of the mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1-2), those who have received a revelation and who will faithfully release the full content of these mysteries to unbelievers for their entrance into the Body and to believers for their building up in the Body.

The Triune God has a marvelous economy, and the operation of this economy is able to accomplish both the willing and the working of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). He is content, therefore, to limit His operation to the sphere of His organic economy, which is the Body of Christ. God's economy produces the Body of Christ, and He operates within the boundary of the functioning members of His Body. Rather than just announcing the glad tidings of His economy from the heavens, for example, the gospel has been entrusted to the members of His Body. Humanity will not believe unless it hears, humanity will not hear unless there is a proclamation through the members of the Body, and there will not be a proclamation unless the members are sent (Rom. 10:14-15). In addition to having

beautiful feet, those who are sent must also have feet that are shod with the gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15); that is, they must go with a revelation of the mystery, which has been made known to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit (3:5). The word *apostle* means “a sent one,” and a holy apostle is one who has received a revelation of the economy of the mystery and who has been utterly set apart to God for the carrying out of this economy (Rom. 1:1). Certainly, Paul was such an apostle. In principle, however, Christ is still giving gifts to the Body, gifts who can be sent with a revelation of the mysteries in God’s economy to impart the realities of these mysteries into others (Eph. 4:8, 11-12). To be sent is not a matter of going to an organized “mission field”; it is a matter of going in the Body, according to the reality of the mysteries in God’s economy, and bearing the revelation of the mysteries in God’s New Testament economy.

In Ephesians 3:3-5 Paul indicates that the mystery was made known to him by revelation in his human spirit. He received a revelation and then wrote about it in brief (v. 3) and in greater detail (v. 6). This revelation became a governing vision that directed his ministry and impelled him to carry out his stewardship (Acts 26:19; 1 Cor. 9:16-17). All of his work was conducted with God’s economy in view. Even as he neared the end of his ministry, his first concern was to urge his genuine child in faith to charge others not to teach things different from God’s economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4).

The importance of Paul’s charge can be seen in his assessment of the mysteries revealed in his ministry. In Colossians 1:24-26 Paul offers an astounding assessment of the stewardship that was entrusted to him:

I now rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church; of which I became a minister according to the stewardship of God, which was given to me for you, to complete the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations but now has been manifested to His saints.

In these verses Paul speaks of the Body, the mystery, his stewardship according to the economy of God, and the word of God. Throughout the course of his ministry, his sufferings in the flesh were for the Body of Christ, which is the goal of the mystery. According to the stewardship of God, his dispensing ministry completed the word of God through his unveiling and impartation of the real contents of the mystery.

According to Greek grammar, the *mystery* in this verse is in apposition to *the word of God* in v. 25, showing that the mystery is the word of God. This mystery concerns Christ

and the church (Eph. 5:32), the Head and the Body. The unveiling of this mystery through the apostle Paul is the completing of the word of God as the divine revelation. (Recovery Version, Col. 1:26, note 1)

Paul’s ministry completed the word of God in its revelation of Christ as the mystery of God (2:2), the church as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4-6), and Christ and the church as the great mystery (5:32). The Body of Christ, the mysterious, hidden goal of God’s economy, is spoken of only in Paul’s Epistles. In addition to associating his stewardship with the completion of the word of God, Paul associated it with the gospel in Romans 16:25-26:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel, that is, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages but has now been manifested, and through the prophetic writings, according to the command of the eternal God, has been made known to all the Gentiles for the obedience of faith.

From the first chapter to the last chapter of Romans, Paul unfolds the gospel according to the revelation of the mystery (1:1, 9, 15-16; 2:16; 16:25). This mystery was revealed to Paul, and he proclaimed it as the gospel. This gospel has the power to actually establish the believers as the Body of Christ, which is practically expressed in the local churches (16:1, 5, 23). Paul received this revelation in his regenerated human spirit⁸ (Eph. 3:5), and he served the gospel of His Son in this same spirit (Rom. 1:9).

In his gospel service Paul was willing to confine his speaking to the limits of this revealed mystery. His emphatic stress on the mysteries in God’s economy is instructive. To the Ephesians he boldly declared that his calling was simply to “enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is” (3:9). To the distracted Corinthians, he frankly stated the simplicity of his motive:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, came not according to excellence of speech or of wisdom, announcing to you the mystery of God. For I did not determine to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and this One crucified. (1 Cor. 2:1-2)

Even with such single-minded determination, however, Paul did not assume that the mystery could be easily conveyed or received. And so he prayed on two levels—for his speaking and for those whose contact with the economy of God was predicated upon his words. In Ephesians 6:18-19 he urges the saints to pray for one another by means of all prayer and petition and to pray for him that utterance would be given in the opening of his mouth to make known in boldness the mystery of the gospel. In

Colossians 4:3-4 he simply asks for prayer to open a door for him to speak the mystery of Christ.

Paul also prayed that the Father of glory would grant the saints a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him, having been enlightened in the eyes of their heart (Eph. 1:17-18). Even though Paul faithfully dispensed the content of the mystery in his ministry, he realized that it was entirely possible for his words to be received as nothing more than mere words. Unless the eyes of the heart are enlightened, no light will shine upon the revelation that is presented. And unless the eyes of our heart are enlightened, there will be no attendant wisdom, no understanding of the things that God has prepared for those who love Him.

The power to consummate the mysteries in God's economy is inherent within the revelation that comes from God and in the teaching of the apostles. This power will be operative, however, only as long as it does not encounter a cold heart. A heart that has grown fat is a final barrier that must be overcome in order to enter into the reality of the mysteries in God's economy (Matt. 13:15).

"Unto the Full Knowledge of the Mystery"

Paul's two prayers in Ephesians deal with the heart. In chapter one his prayer relates to the eyes of our heart being enlightened. Without an enlightened heart, it is impossible to see and understand all of the spiritual blessings of the Triune God in our human spirit. A cold heart effectively nullifies the riches of His grace. The condition of our heart determines both our participation in God's economy and the pace of that participation. Unless the heart is turned toward the Lord, the veil will not be taken away. An unturned heart is a veil that shuts us out from beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord and from being transformed into His same image (2 Cor. 3:16-18). The heart is the key to experiencing all that God has planned and willed. When we hear His voice, we should not harden our hearts (Heb. 3:7-8).

In Ephesians 3 Paul's prayer is centered on the believers' experience of the economy of God, and again the heart plays a crucial role. In order to experience God's economy, we need to be strengthened with power through the Spirit into the inner man so that Christ can make His home in our hearts (vv. 16-17). Our regenerated human spirit is our inner man. Since it is joined as one spirit with the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), it is the source of our strengthening.

This strengthening enables Christ to make His home in our hearts. A cold and hardened heart, however, is impervious to the spreading of Christ into our inward parts. This is because God will not force His economy on anyone. It is freely given; it must be freely received. A seeking believer, a growing member in the Body of Christ, is a receiver. May we be those who receive an abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness to reign in life through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17) and those who receive in meekness the implanted word, which is able to save our souls (James 1:21). Christ making His home in our hearts is the operation of God's economy in this age. As Christ makes His home, we are headed up in Christ and built up with all the saints to apprehend all that Christ is, rising to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ by the growth of the divine life (Eph. 3:17-18; 4:13). A cold heart terminates this operation. A cold heart separates us from Christ. And a cold heart isolates us from the Body.

A cold heart, however, can be warmed and brought back into the experience of God's economy. In Colossians 2:1-2

*Without
an enlightened heart,
it is impossible to see and
understand all of the spiritual
blessings of the Triune God
in our human spirit.
A cold heart effectively nullifies
the riches of His grace.*

Paul speaks of comforting the hearts of those in Laodicea: "That their hearts may be comforted, they being knit together in love and unto all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, unto the full knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ." A comforted heart is the first step toward gaining the full knowledge of the mystery of God. "When our hearts have been comforted, we being knit together in love, and our minds

function properly, we will have the full knowledge of Christ as the mystery of God" (Recovery Version, v. 2, note 4). There is no heart so cold that it cannot be warmed and comforted. There is no separation so complete that it cannot be breached with love. And there is no saint who cannot be knit together in love into the Body. We may know all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith to remove mountains, but if we do not have love, we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). The Body is built up in love, it is rooted and grounded in love, and it will stand before Him in love (Eph. 4:16; 3:17; 1:4). In our love for one another, there is comfort sufficient to warm even the coldest hearts and to bring the members of the Body into the effective operation of the economy of God.

Conclusion

The mysteries in God's economy have been made known in reality, and they are being made known in our experience. The Triune God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing; we only need to receive them with an open heart.

The word of God concerning these mysteries has been completed; we only need to receive this revelation with an open heart and hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience (1 Tim. 3:9). With a dispensing that flows from the heart of God into the hearts of those whom He selected and marked out in eternity past, the seemingly unknowable Triune God will be expressed consummately through Christ as the Head and the church as His organic Body. To Him who is able to do superabundantly above all that we ask or think, may His mysterious economy be our experience in this age so that there may be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations forever and ever. Amen. AFC

Notes

¹In this article and throughout *Affirmation & Critique*, *economy* refers to God's administrative plan to carry out His purpose. It is from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which appears throughout the New Testament in various derivations. It is a central term in Paul's Epistles, especially Ephesians. See 1:10 and 3:9. In 1:10 it is variously translated *dispensation* (KJV) and *administration* (NASB). Concerning *administration*, W. E. Vine notes:

In Eph. 1:10 and 3:9, it is used of the arrangement or administration by God, by which in "the fulness of the times" (or seasons) God will sum up all things in the heavens and on earth in Christ...*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. (322-323)

²However faint this witnessing may be, it is always present because our indwelling Triune God cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). We can fan into flame the gift of God by calling on His name in order to provide Him with the opportunity to be rich unto us in our experience, even to the point of restoring unto us the gladness of our salvation (1:6; Rom. 10:12; Psa. 51:12).

³The paramount importance that many Christian teachers attach to determining God's will for our individual life is a cogent example of this tendency.

⁴A distinction needs to be made between God's desire to be known by humanity and His need for separation from sinful humanity. Sin forces God to remain apart from man, but it does not stem His love for humanity.

⁵See Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14, 17-18; 3:13, 16, 21; 5:27. See also "The Economy of Grace and Glory in Ephesians," *Affirmation & Critique* IV:1 (January 1999): 31-42.

⁶Paul also associates glory with mystery in 1 Timothy 3:16 when he begins by speaking of the mystery of godliness, the living of God in the church, and ends with the assurance that the church will be taken up in glory.

[*Taken up in glory*] refers to Christ's ascension into glory (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9-11; 2:33; Phil. 2:9). According to the sequence of historical events, Christ's ascension preceded His being preached among the nations. However,

it is listed here as the last step in Christ's being the manifestation of God in the flesh. This must indicate that the church too is taken up in glory. Hence, it implies that not only Christ Himself as the Head but also the church as the Body are the manifestation of God in the flesh. When a church is well taken care of according to the instructions given in the first two chapters,...the church will function as the house and household of the living God for His move on the earth, and as the supporting pillar and holding base of the truth, bearing the divine reality of Christ and His Body as a testimony to the world. Then the church becomes the continuation of Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness—Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh! (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 3:16, note 9)

⁷The heading up of all things is a prerequisite for the believers' full attainment of sonship in the Body of Christ. Except for our creation in His image and likeness, humanity has fallen utterly short of the glory of God, being dead in trespasses and sins. The entire universe has been affected by this fall as well. Therefore, there is a need for the heading up of all things in Christ in order to make known the Triune God. The economy of God produces a universal heading up that accomplishes the will of God. This heading up operates in the church to produce the Body of Christ in order to subject all things under the feet of the Christ, who is Head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22).

⁸The regenerated human spirit is the focal point of revelation because revelation comes from God, and in the New Testament God interacts with redeemed humanity from the center of man's being, his human spirit, to the circumference of man's being, his body. Spiritual matters are revealed spiritually by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11-12). Caragounis tentatively touches this matter in attempting to understand the hidden nature of revelation.

Eph 3:5 ff. states and Col 1:26 ff. implies, that it was hid from the men of previous generations. Was this a concealment in openness?—perhaps of the kind we have in Mt: they hear, but they do not understand; they see, but they do not perceive? Something of this sort seems to be suggested by a new factor in connection with the revelation of the mystery that emerges in the stage of drama in the NT. This factor is the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is divine and this means that a divine factor is *necessary* for the comprehension of the [*mysterion*]. (34)

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