

“THE MYSTERY of the FAITH”

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The apostle Paul, in giving guidance to his younger co-worker Timothy for the administration of a local church, says that the deacons should be ones “holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9). The faith here is the objective faith, the things that we believe in. These are the contents of God’s New Testament economy, which is centered on Christ’s person and work for the accomplishment of the good pleasure of God’s will, including our salvation. While to us the faith may seem objective and simple, to Paul the faith was a “mystery,” and this characterization should give us pause. We should not expect that Paul is applying the meaning of the modern English word *mystery* to the faith that is common to all believers. Our English word *mystery* is, in fact, the transliteration of the Greek word that he uses (μυστήριον, *mystērion*), and his word has its own particular meanings, all of which do not match that of our English word. Thus, in reading *the mystery of the faith*, we should be careful not to deflate what he is saying to what easily comes to the mind of an English speaker. He is not saying that the faith is “mysterious,” that is, difficult to understand or shrouded in secrecy or beyond complete perception. He is saying that the faith is a μυστήριον, in his sense of the term, and this characterization opens up to us something fundamental about the objective faith, which has been delivered to us once for all and is common to us all (Jude 3; Titus 1:4).

The Greek word μυστήριον (*mystērion*) has a long and storied history in the Ancient Greek language, and careful study of the word indicates that, like most words in most languages, it developed in meaning over time (TDNT 4:802-824). Thus, in trying to understand what Paul means by the term, we must be careful not to anachronistically apply meanings that probably do not obtain in his writings. Paul’s use of μυστήριον needs to be isolated not just from modern language derivatives but also from archaic Greek predecessors. Because Paul was thoroughly versed in the Old Testament

writings, it is perhaps enlightening to note that in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament μυστήριον is linked to revelation and picks up the connotation of something that is to be or has been revealed. This is particularly clear in Daniel: “the mystery was revealed to Daniel” (Dan. 2:19); “there is a God in the heavens who reveals mysteries” (Dan. 2:28); “He who reveals mysteries has made known to you what will happen” (Dan. 2:29); “this mystery has not been revealed to me because of some wisdom that is in me” (Dan. 2:30); “your [Daniel’s] God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a Revealer of mysteries” (Dan. 2:47). Paul, no doubt, understood that a

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μυστήριον in the biblical sense is not simply something held in secret (as in the Greek mystery religions) but something formerly held in secret but now revealed by God. He adopts this connotation in his own use of the term in Ephesians: “By revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I have written previously in brief, by which, in reading it, you can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit” (Eph. 3:3-5). “The mystery,” for Paul, was not something mysterious or secret; it was something that was formerly hidden but