

## A Great Mystery

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Not mysticism but mystery, the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:19)! Discipleship has to do with a God-given mystery (Mk 4:11). So Christ's ministers, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1, are mystagogues, stewards of God's mysteries who usher fellow disciples into the mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4), the great mystery of Christian piety (1 Tim 3:16).

As mystagogues they do not belong to a spiritual elite with secret knowledge and experience of spiritual matters or a higher level of religious consciousness than ordinary people. They are not spiritual highfliers who dazzle others with their superior spiritual wisdom. There is, in fact, nothing secret or obscure about whom they serve, or what they do. They work for Christ and with him in God's household, his earthly temple, the church. As ministers of Christ and his gospel they are down to earth stewards of God's mysteries.

As in Colossians 1:25-26 Paul here uses a picture that needed no explaining in the ancient world. The steward of a house managed it for its owner and deployed its resources for the benefit of its residents in keeping with the will of the householder. For pastors their stewardship is a matter of mystery because their divine Master is hidden from the sight of those who live and work with him. So too the heavenly resources of his earthly household! As stewards of heavenly riches they provide all the members of the household with what they need for their spiritual life on earth (Eph 3:8; Col 1:27; 2:3).

We quite commonly confuse a mystery with a secret. Even though both of them have to do with something that is hidden and unknown, a secret ceases to be a secret once you know it, like my bank balance, while a mystery remains a mystery even when you know it. It, in fact, becomes more mysterious as you are drawn further into it. Take the mystery of human life or of love! The more you experience and study them, the more you discover that they are only ever partially knowable and explicable. The more you examine a mystery, the more it escapes your apprehension and comprehension. Like living and loving, it is a matter of experience rather than mere intellectual understanding.

Like life and love, the mysteries of God are not kept secret but hidden in plain sight for all who have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind to understand. They are not private and esoteric, but public and available to those who have faith in Jesus and listen to him. They participate in them sacramentally, liturgically and devotionally by their communal and personal involvement in the divine service. Their whole life is a matter of mystery.

Well, what then does the New Testament teach us about that mystery? Quite simply it revolves around God's incarnate Son Jesus and our faith in him and his hidden presence with us in the church. It is the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:19). As such it has many dimensions. It is **cosmic** in its purpose. It has to do with God's will to reunite heaven and earth through the life, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ and join angels and human beings in a single holy community

under his headship (Eph 1:7-10). It is **historical** in its explication. The enactment of God's purpose for humanity was hidden from human eyes as a mystery through the whole of human history until its disclosure by the life, death and resurrection of his Son and the proclamation of the gospel after his ascension (Rom 16:25-26; Eph 3:1-6). The mystery of God is **personal** in nature. It depends on Christ's presence with his disciples and their personal union with him (Col 2:1-3). The mystery of Christ is **communal** in its location. His presence and benefits are disclosed corporately to the saints in the church, the place where he resides with them (Col 1:24-27). It is therefore **liturgical** in its manifestation, for through their sacramental union with him, the proclamation of the gospel, and faith in him they have access to God the Father (Eph 5:32; Eph 3:7-12). It is **eschatological** in its orientation. Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth for us (1 Tim 3:16). Our hope of glory depends on him and his glorification (Col 1:27; 3:1-3). So, despite its many facets, the mystery of God is both concealed and revealed, like treasure in a chest, in God's incarnate Son (Col 2:3). We have no access to it apart from him and his hidden presence with us.

Our participation in the mystery of Christ depends on four things, the proclamation of God's word, the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, receptive faith, and a clear conscience.

Through his teaching of God's word in parables in his earthly ministry Jesus disclosed the mysteries of God's kingdom (Matt 13:1-23; Lk 8:4-19) and the mystery of him as the Messianic King (Mk 4:1-25). Then after his ascension the apostles and their successors in ministry made these mysteries known through the proclamation of the gospel (Rom 16:25-26; 1 Cor 2:6-7; Eph 3:7-11; 6:19; Col 1:25-26; 4:3). God's word revealed what was otherwise hidden from sensory experience and cognitive reach. The apostles used the prophetic writings of the Old Testament to proclaim the mystery of Christ in the church (Rom 16:25; Eph 3:5). Their preaching and teaching of the gospel, now written in the New Testament, gives those who have ears to hear access to that mystery. The Scriptures of both testaments still do that as they are read and heard, expounded and received in the church to the present day. Their subject matter is the mystery of Christ.

Through the proclamation of God's inspiring word its hearers receive the Holy Spirit (Eph 3:5). The Spirit opens their hearts, so that they understood what is said and receive what is given to them by Christ. As God's word is taught, the Holy Spirit reveals what no human eye has ever heard, no human ear has ever heard, and no human heart has ever imagined; it reveals what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:6-8), because they know the love of Christ (Eph 3:14-19). Apart from the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, even those who hear God's word do not understand what is said to them and receive what is given to them by God. As Isaiah had prophesied, they neither perceive what they see nor understand what they hear (Mk 4:11-12).

The mystery of Christ depends on faith in him. It is the mystery of faith (1 Tim 3:9). Faith comes before our participation in it. Faith opens the door to the proper, transformative experience of it, because it rightly receives what is given. Faithful participation depends both on

what is heard (Mk 4:24) as well as how it is heard (Lk 8:18). The gospel needs to be heard with faith in order to receive what it provides for the disciple. Apart from faith in Christ and his word, the door to the Father's house remains closed. An unbeliever has no access to the mystery of faith.

Faithful participation in the mystery of Christ depends on the reception and retention of a clear conscience (1 Tim 3:9). We do not gain access to it by the exercise of our theological understanding, our spiritual affectivity, our religious imagination, or our godly behavior. They may indeed muddy the waters for us by distorting what we hear and blocking our reception. Our reception of what Christ offers to us depends on a clear conscience, a conscience that is rightly attuned to God's word, a conscience that has been cleansed from the taint of sin by the proclamation of the gospel. It is like the still water of a crystal clear pond that receives the bright sunlight and reflects the whole sky as in a mirror. It receives the light without obstruction and distortion. It is filled with the light of Christ rather than its own spiritual darkness. That light drives out all darkness from our hearts. Those who have a clear conscience see themselves and others as God sees them. In fact, Jesus says that those who are pure in heart see God (Matt 5: 8).

The mystery of Christian piety is indeed great (1 Tim 3:16). It is great because its focus is on the hidden presence of God's incarnate Son with us here on earth and our devotion to him in our life on earth. He brings heaven down to earth for us by his incarnation in order to bring us bodily with him into the glorious presence of his heavenly Father. In faith our lives are already now hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3-4). When he appears in glory, we who now travel with him on earth will appear with him in glory. Then the mystery of faith will become a matter of sight. That is the great mystery which we now confess as Christ's disciples!