

The Church as a Mystery

Introduction

Covenant Theologians claim that the Church began in the Old Testament. They say that the Church in the Old Testament is essentially the same as the Church in the New Testament. Since the apostle Paul describes the Church as a *mystery*, we need to consider the credibility of this claim.

Paul's Description of the Church

Paul described the Church as a *mystery*:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the *mystery* (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the *mystery* of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the *mystery*, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. (Eph. 3:1-10)

This is a great *mystery*, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:32)

What does the word *mystery* mean?

Definition of Mystery

In Ephesians chapter 3 Paul defines the word *mystery* as being *knowledge which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men but has now been revealed by the Spirit*.

The English word *mystery* is typically defined as “something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain.” However, the Greek word *μυστήριον* does not have the same meaning as the English word *mystery*.

Consider Louw and Nida’s definition:

μυστήριον, ου *n*: the content of that which has not been known before but which has been revealed to an in-group or restricted constituency—‘secret, mystery.’ ... There is a serious problem involved in translating *μυστήριον* by a word which is equivalent to the English expression ‘mystery,’ for this term in English refers to a secret which people have tried to uncover but which they have failed to understand.¹

The basic meaning of the Greek word *μυστήριον* is something “which has not been known before.” Vine agrees with Louw and Nida:

In the NT it denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit. In the ordinary sense a “mystery” implies knowledge withheld; its Scriptural significance is truth revealed. Hence the terms especially associated with the subject are “made known,” “manifested,” “revealed,” ...²

The Greek word *μυστήριον* has the idea of knowledge which has been previously withheld and which has been revealed at a point in time by God. Since Paul describes the Church as being a *mystery*, we must conclude that knowledge regarding the Church had not been previously revealed. In other words, people had no knowledge of the Church prior to the time of Paul since that knowledge had not been made known in previous ages. Therefore, the Church could not possibly have started in the Old Testament.

Consider these examples of how Paul used the word *mystery*:

¹ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. [*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*](#) 1996 : 344. Print.

² Vines, W. E., M. A. Entry for 'Mystery'. Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words. <http://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/ved/m/mystery.html> (accessed July 5, 2017).

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the *mystery* kept secret since the world began. (Rom. 16:25)

... the *mystery* which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. (Col. 1:26)

Again, we see that *μυστήριον* was knowledge that had previously been kept secret or hidden until it had been revealed at a point in time by God.

If the Church is a *mystery* which was not previously revealed, then how can Covenant Theologians say that the Church began in the Old Testament?

Defense by Covenant Theology

Oswald T. Allis has this explanation:

It [the Church] was a mystery in the sense that, like other teachings which are spoken of as such, it was not fully revealed in the Old Testament and was completely hidden from the carnal minded.³

Allis completely ignores the definition of *μυστήριον* found in standard lexicons. Rather than accept the normal explanation of *something not previously revealed*, he says in means *something not fully revealed in the Old Testament*. Allis attempts to force the Biblical concept of a *mystery* into his framework of Covenant Theology.

Dr. Earl Radmacher demonstrates the error of this argument:

Paul did not say that it was a mystery hid in the Old Testament or that it was a mystery hid from the carnal minded, but that it was a mystery hid from or unknown by any except God himself. It was “hid in God” and it had been hid there “from the beginning of the ages (*aionon*).” By this reference to ages he is speaking of eternity past.⁴

Paul wrote that this *mystery* “in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (Eph. 3:5). It seems quite clear from this verse that this *mystery* was unknown in previous generations.

³ Radmacher, Earl. *The Nature Of The Church*. Portland, OR: Western Baptist Press, 1972. 198.

⁴ Ibid.

However, Oswald T. Allis has an explanation to deal with this dilemma. He claims that the word “as” in verse 5 shows that this *mystery* was partially revealed in Old Testament times and therefore is not distinctive to the church age.⁵

According to Allis, the *mystery* that Paul spoke of in Ephesians 3:5 had actually been made known in the Old Testament. However, it was not as clear back then “as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.” But is that a valid interpretation?

While a dictionary or lexicon can give you a broad range of meanings for words, context always determines the specific meaning of a particular word. When we look at the context of Ephesians 3:5 we see that Paul is not making a comparison to show similarities between what was known in the Old Testament and what has been revealed in the New Testament. Instead, Paul is showing a distinct contrast between the two time periods. The contrast is between the “other ages” and “now.”

James Stifler explains:

The “as” does not give a comparison between degrees of revelation in the former time and “now.” It denies that there was any revelation at all of the mystery in that former time.⁶

Stifler goes on to say that there are instances where the word *ὡς* would be better translated *but* instead of *as*. Dr. Radmacher agrees with Stifler and suggests this rendering of Paul’s thoughts: “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, but it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets.”⁷

Several other translations support Dr. Radmacher’s rendering:

- In former generations this was not disclosed to the human race; but now it has been revealed by inspiration to his dedicated apostles and prophets. (NEB)
- People who lived in other times were not told that secret. But now, through the Spirit, God has shown that secret to his holy apostles and prophets. (NCV)

⁵ Oswald T Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. (Philadelphia: 1945), 90-110.

⁶ Radmacher, *The Nature Of The Church*, 201.

⁷ Ibid.

- God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now he has revealed it by the Holy Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. (NLT)

Dr. Radmacher accurately sums up the problem with the interpretation offered by Allis:

Too often Bible students search until they find the meaning which substantiates their previously determined interpretation. The present problem is a case in point. Allis makes an assumption apparently without considering other grammatical possibilities.⁸

The Mystery of Ephesians Chapter Three

What specifically is the *mystery* of Ephesians chapter three that Paul was talking about? The *mystery* which God revealed to Paul was “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (v. 6). The new truth which had not been previously revealed was that Gentiles would have an equal position and equal privileges in the body of Christ. While there were Gentile proselytes in the Old Testament, they certainly did not enjoy an equal status with the Jews.

In verse six Paul uses three Greek words to show this new status of equality that the Gentiles in the body of Christ had never experienced before.

- The word *συγκληρονόμος* can be translated *fellow heirs* and speaks of the Gentiles having an equal inheritance with the Jews.
- The word *σύσσωμος* can be translated *fellow members* and speaks of the Gentiles belonging to the same body as the Jews.
- The word *συμμέτοχος* can be translated *fellow partakers* and speaks of the Gentiles having an equal partnership with the Jews.

This concept of Gentiles having an equal position and equal privileges in the body of Christ alongside the Jews was completely unknown in the Old Testament.

Conclusion

Paul described the Church as being a *mystery*. The Biblical definition of the word *mystery* means something “which has not been known before.” This definition supports the conclusion that the Church did not begin in the book of Genesis and is nowhere to be

⁸ Ibid. 200.

found in the Old Testament. The arguments put forth by Covenant Theologians to support their theory of the Church beginning in the Old Testament are less than convincing. While Gentile blessing was predicted in the Old Testament, the new status that Gentiles have in the body of Christ with the Jews was never seen in the Old Testament.

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