

## The Mysteries of God.

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**I**N clear and decisive terms the Apostle of the Gentiles was wont to set forth the relation in which the Christian Ministry stands with respect to those for whose benefit it was appointed. Whether he dealt with the holders of this sacred office as “ambassadors for Christ,” “labourers together with God,” “builders upon the one Foundation,” or “stewards of the mysteries of God,” we ever find that St. Paul held in the highest honour that ministry of which he himself made such full proof.

It was with the object of magnifying this office in general estimation, and of inciting the ordained servants of his Lord to a definite and comprehensive grasp of their responsibilities, that the Apostle wrote those great words (1 Cor. iv. 1): “Let a man so account of us, as of ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God”: *οικονόμοι μυστηρίων Θεοῦ*. The *οικονόμος*, or house-steward, among the ancients was a confidential slave to whom his master entrusted the direction of his house, and in particular the duty of allotting to all the servants their tasks and provisions. Thus the “steward” is a dispenser of that which is committed to his trust.

But what are we to understand by the “mysteries” with which the ministers of Christ are put in trust? The words *mystery* and *mysterious* are in common use, and perhaps their usual significance is more of a hindrance than a help to the casual reader of the passage before us, for, whereas in the Scriptural sense the stress is laid upon the *unveiling* or revelation of that which is (or has been) secret, common parlance emphasizes the *secrecy* of the matter in question, and implies that it is likely to remain hidden. Bishop Lightfoot (on Col. i. 26) says: “The idea of secrecy or reserve disappears when *μυστήριον* is adopted into the Christian vocabulary by St. Paul; and the

word signifies simply 'a truth which was once hidden but now is revealed,' 'a truth which, without special revelation, would have been unknown.'" As this quotation implies, the New Testament word was "adopted" from the *μυστήρια* of the ancient Greeks, of which the Eleusinian mysteries are the most memorable. To become acquainted with these heathen mysteries needed an elaborate process of initiation, and thus, while they "were strictly confined to a narrow circle, the Christian mysteries are freely communicated to all"—to all, that is, who can know "the things of the Spirit of God," truths which are "spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. ii. 14). And so Dean Alford, writing on the passage under consideration, explains the *μυστήρια* thus: "Hidden treasures of God—*i.e.*, the riches of His grace, *now manifested* in Christ, which His ministers announce and distribute to all, having received them from the Spirit for that purpose."

The way is now clear for us to examine into the definite truths which St. Paul had in his mind as the revealed secrets, the "mysteries," of which the ministers of Christ are the authorized "stewards" or dispensers; and in examining them we will confine ourselves to the Pauline Epistles. These mysteries are seven in number, and we will take them in the order of their disclosure.

## I.

First, we have the fact of *the Incarnation of Christ*, when the eternal Word "became flesh, and dwelt among us." In 1 Tim. iii. 16 (R.V.) we have the words: "Great is the mystery of godliness (*τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον*); He who was manifested in the flesh." This is the first and greatest clause in what probably formed some hymn or confession of the ancient Church. We perpetuate it in our Litany in the words, "By the mystery of Thy holy Incarnation, good Lord, deliver us." Now we can plainly see here, as we shall when we take each of the *μυστήρια*, why the term is appropriate. The revealed truth, though shadowed forth in the Old Testament, lay hidden

in the lap of preceding ages. The first Lessons for the Christmas Day services, from Isaiah ix. and vii. respectively, give plain prophetic indication of the marvellous fact of the Incarnation. We find this *mystery* prefigured in the great names by which the "Child" to be "born," the "Son" to be "given," should be called. And again, at Evensong, the fact of the Virgin Birth of the Messiah is set forth, whose name was to be called Immanuel. Isaiah's very words are quoted by St. Matthew as fulfilled when God "was manifested in the flesh." It was quite in the spirit of a reference to a *μυστήριον* that St. Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Galatians: "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal. iv. 4, R.V.). There was to be a "fulness" of expectation before the veiled reality should be manifested in actual fact.

## II.

The second Pauline mystery, in the order of sequence, is termed "The mystery of the Gospel" (Eph. vi. 19, *cf.* Rom. xvi. 25). We must understand this expression—*vide* context of Eph. vi. 19—as referring to that which was to the Apostle the essential subject of his life's ministry and preaching: "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," and all the message of salvation centred in the Person and work of the Christ. "The Gospel" stands for the whole counsel of God as it concerns man's present and eternal well-being. "Christ sent me," the Apostle plainly states (1 Cor. i. 17, 24), "to preach the Gospel," and he defines his commission concisely as "Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." St. Paul refers elsewhere to this, his great life-work, under the significant term of a "mystery." A remarkable instance of this occurs in the Doxology at the conclusion of the Epistle to the Romans. Drs. Sanday and Headlam thus strikingly bring out the force of the passage in Romans xvi. 25 by paraphrase in their Commentary: "The Gospel that I proclaim, the preaching which announces Jesus the Messiah; that preaching in which God's eternal purpose, the *mystery* of His working, kept silent since the world began, has been

revealed, a purpose which the Prophets of old foretold." This passage is specially valuable as clearly defining the precise meaning of the term *μυστήριον*. We are carried back in thought to the foreshadowing of the Gospel in type, in the Mosaic ceremonial ritual, in history and in prophecy—as, *e.g.*, Isaiah liii.—till the world was ready for the full revelation and manifestation of the Messiah, when the Gospel became an evident reality in all its wondrous features of love, grace, and mercy for the children of men. And may we not perceive a further and inner sense in which this Gospel is a "mystery" with respect to its actual reception by the individual? In the reception of Gospel tidings by the heart there must be a spiritual initiation of enlightenment before it is an apprehended and saving fact. This becomes evident from the words of St. Paul in 1 Cor. ii. 14: "The natural man" (*ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος*) "receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Only the *πνευματικοὶ ἄνθρωποι* have received initiation into the reality and experience of "the mystery of the Gospel."

### III.

We must pass on to a third sense in which St. Paul uses the term *μυστήριον*. In the fifth chapter of his Epistle to the Ephesians, he concludes an exhortation to wives and to husbands with these words (ver. 32): "This is a great mystery"—or (R.V.), "This mystery is great"—"but I speak concerning Christ and the Church." It is needless to refer in detail to the preceding verses of the chapter, where the marriage bond is taken in several respects as illustrating the union that is betwixt Christ and the Church. I will only recall those wonderful words, in which it is stated (ver. 30), "We"—the spiritual Church as such—"are members of His body." Dean Alford thus expands the meaning here: "As the woman owed her natural being to the man, so we owe our entire spiritual being to Christ, our source and head; and as the woman was one flesh with the man in this natural relation, so we in our entire

spiritual relation—spirit, soul, and body—are one with Christ, God manifested in our humanity, parts and members of His glorified Body.” These words concisely convey the great fact of the *mystery* before us, and it is emphasized several times by the Apostle in the illustration of the one Body of which Christ is the Head and all we are members (*vide* 1 Cor. xii.), just as it was indicated by our Lord Himself in the parable of the vine and the branches (John xv.).

This *μυστήριον* had been foreshadowed long before, in the Old Testament Scriptures—as, *e.g.*, in Psalm xlv.—that beautiful “song of loves,” that goodly matter touching the King. Professor Barnes, in a fascinating recent work, “*Lex in Corde*,” writes respecting vv. 10-15 of this Psalm: “There is to be found a clear foreshadowing of the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church, by reason of which members of the Church are members of Christ and fellow-workers with God.” The Book of the Canticles also has, as the entire scope of its idylls, a forecast in symbol of the blessings which accompany the union of Christ with His Church.

Before passing on to the next division of our subject, it may be well briefly to refer to St. Paul’s use of the word “Church” (*ἐκκλησία*) in its inclusive spiritual sense. There is much loose and indiscriminate use of the term “Church” in these days. Visible Churches are confused with the invisible “Church of the living God.” The arrogant claims of the Romish Church seem to be accountable for this; and those who are swayed by Roman ideas seem to forget that Rome in usurping the sole right to be a Church isolates herself from those who court her fellowship. We must recognize the fact that there is a comprehensive, invisible Church of God which is neither Anglican, Greek, Roman, or Protestant and Nonconforming, but which, thank God, has its members who “profess and call themselves Christians” (and who possess the seal—“the Lord knoweth them that are His”) in every visible Church under heaven. A due consideration of this fact should prevent anyone from denying to non-episcopal bodies the right to be called

“Christian Churches.” Those were wise words of Bishop Bedell, written in 1619: “Wherever saving truth in an outward assembly and profession calls men to God, there I account a visible Church.”

#### IV.

A fourth *mystery* of God claims our attention. It is fully expounded in the second and third chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians. It concerns the revealed purpose of God to admit believing Gentiles to be fellow-heirs with converted Jews in one body.

Now, it is difficult for us to realize that the inclusion of the Gentiles with the Jews in the same opportunities of Divine favour and blessing was a new thing which had to penetrate their minds by special revelation and inward conviction before they were able to grasp it. This glorious fact can indeed be traced in the promises made to Abraham, in the glowing pages of Isaiah, and in glimpses into the future in other Old Testament predictions. But the mystery was hidden from their minds, and their hearts were blinded. The great truth had to be gradually unfolded when Christ came into the world. In the greeting of the infant Redeemer by Eastern sages, and in various events during the three years' ministry of the Son of Man, indications can be plainly seen of the coming inclusion of the non-Jewish world in the privileges of the Gospel. But still the actual fact remained an unrealized *mystery*, until to Peter on the housetop at Joppa was granted the vision of the great sheet let down from heaven, containing all manner of living creatures, clean and unclean, with the voice charging him to “arise, slay and eat.” Simultaneously to Cornelius, the Gentile centurion, there came a vision in which an angel commanded him to send men to Joppa to confer with Peter. The issue was that Peter's mouth was opened to declare the newly revealed truth that Christ is “Lord of all,” and that “in every nation”—be men called by what name they may—“he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to Him.” Thus the great Epiphany truth became a recognized fact in the Church,

St. Paul was set apart as the Apostle of the Gentiles, "the middle wall of partition" between Jews and Gentiles was broken down (Eph. ii. 14), and those great words of the *Te Deum* became a recognized fact in the Christian Church: "When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers." This *mystery* is amply unfolded in the third chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, where the word *μυστήριον* is thrice used (vv. 3, 4, 9) in connection with the grand unfolded fact, now so familiar (ver. 6, R.V.): "That the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." The verses that follow this definition give us St. Paul's own sense of his personal call "to make all men see what is the fellowship" (R.V. margin, *stewardship*) "of the mystery, which from all ages hath been hid in God."

When we reflect that the evolution of this age-long mystery opens out the great missionary call for world-wide evangelization, we see its far-reaching outcome, and its limitless possibilities, under Divine blessing upon the ministry of the Gospel.

So far we have considered four definite and distinct uses of the term *μυστήριον*, as used by St. Paul in describing great facts of infinite importance, once hidden but now revealed, of which the minister of Christ is called to be a steward or dispenser. These are: (1) The *mystery* of Godliness—the Incarnation and its outcome. (2) The *mystery* of the Gospel. (3) The *mystery* of the union between Christ and the Church. (4) The *mystery* of Gentiles and Jews being fellow-heirs of the Gospel. Each of these has become a realized fact, and is generally accepted as such.

Now, the three other truths which find a place in the range of Pauline mysteries have yet to become matters of actual experience. They are surely predicted, and many signs and events seem to indicate their approaching consummation in fact. There can be no reason to doubt that of these facts of *future* unfolding (as of those universally received and experienced in

the *present*) the ministers of Christ should regard themselves as stewards and expounders.

## V.

The fifth *μυστήριον* forms the subject of the whole eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. We have it clearly defined in verse 25 of that chapter: "I would not, brethren, have you ignorant of this *mystery*, lest ye be wise in your own conceits, that a hardening (A.V., "blindness") in part hath befallen Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in; and so all Israel<sup>1</sup> shall be saved: even as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer; He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob." This verse forms the eventual conclusion, based upon a process of induction, in reply to a question which the Apostle asks at the outset of the chapter: "I say then, Did God cast off His people? God forbid." . . . "God did not cast off His people which He foreknew." Thirty verses are given up to the conclusive proof of his subject, after which St. Paul bursts into a doxology of adoring wonder over "the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God," in this wondrous future revival and regeneration of the scattered Jewish people. We naturally ask, "When shall this thing come to pass?" Of course the answer is that, as regards a definite date, it is not for us to "know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in His own power." And yet we do well to look into this matter. Upon this restoration of the Jewish race in the latter days very much of the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures centre. Moreover, it concerns us vitally as Gentiles. It is when "the fulness of the Gentiles" be come in that "all Israel" (nationally) "shall be saved."

And with this prediction the words of Christ, in St. Luke xxi. 24, clearly agree and synchronize, words spoken just after He had foretold the "desolation" of the capture of Jerusalem by Titus, which was fulfilled in A.D. 70: "Jerusalem shall be

<sup>1</sup> "Israel" here stands for the *nation*. Individual Jews are being saved, through active evangelistic efforts, in large numbers at the present time.



trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." Here is a note of time. "The times of the Gentiles," "the fulness of the Gentiles"—similar expressions of our Lord and the Apostle Paul. In both cases a completion has to come about, and then shall come to pass the revival of the whole Jewish nation. The "natural branches" shall be "grafted into their own olive tree." Careful and reverent search, and the calculation of the prophetic periods of the prophet Daniel, together with observation of "the signs of the times" (*cf.* Matt. xvi. 3 with Luke xxi. 28), have led many prophetic students to the belief that the completion of "the times of the Gentiles" cannot be very far distant. The fact of the rapid re-population of the Holy Land by Jews, together with not a few concurrent events, all pointing in one direction, seem to support this view. And, since these fulfilments will surely coincide with the coming of "the Deliverer" (Rom. xi. 26), this *μυστήριον* should possess a special interest for all those who are "waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

## VI.

The sixth *μυστήριον* (in the Pauline review of truths which fall under this definition, and of which, therefore, we must assume that the minister of Christ is a "steward") is that which deals with the fact of "the resurrection of the just." The passage containing it is very familiar, occurring as it does in the appointed Lesson in the Burial Service. In 1 Cor. xv. 51, 52, we read: "Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." Professor Godet paraphrases these verses thus: "We shall not all die—there will be living Christians when the Lord comes again—but we shall all require to be changed: living believers by transformation (*ἀλλαγῆσόμεθα*), the dead by resurrection (*ἐγερθήσομεθα ἄφθαρτοι*). For it is impossible to enter into the kingdom of glory with this earthly body composed

of materials subject to corruption." This passage corresponds rather closely with that at the close of 1 Thess. iv. There, as here, "the resurrection of the *just*" only, as mentioned by Christ in St. Luke xiv. 14, seems to be referred to, and it tallies with "the first resurrection," of which we read in Rev. xx. 6. This, then, is evidently distinguished from the general resurrection of *the just and the unjust* at a future and terminal period.

Again, both in 1 Cor. xv. and 1 Thess. iv. we read of those that are asleep in Christ, and those that are alive and remain being raised incorruptible—caught up—"to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. iv.). In both accounts, also, this resurrection is to be heralded by the sound of a trumpet, and it will come with great suddenness (*vide* 1 Cor. xv. 52), ἐν ἄτομῳ, in an indivisible moment: ἐν ῥιπῇ ὀφθαλμοῦ, in a movement of the eyelid. Surely this special indication of so great rapidity must be given in order to warn all true disciples to be in readiness for this unique event. A special incentive to preparedness may be found in the remarkable words: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: over these the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years." Is it not reasonable to ask whether the "ministers of Christ" are not remiss in neglecting their stewardship of this *mystery*, which is so calculated to cheer and encourage the faithful members of "the flock of God" which they are exhorted to "feed"?

## VII.

One more Pauline *mystery* remains. It is found in 2 Thess. ii. 7—τὸ μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας—which is correctly rendered in the Revised Version by the words, "The mystery of lawlessness." The first twelve verses of this chapter contain the statement of this momentous and difficult subject. It is not within the scope of this paper to go further than outline what seem to be the plain indications of Scriptural exegesis. The purpose we aim at is not to broach interpretations that are strained or novel, but simply to be faithful to the revealed mind

of the Spirit. If the main object of arousing ourselves to the supreme importance of making full proof of our ministry, by taking for our subject-matter "the whole counsel of God," is in any way achieved, this is enough. Again, if "ministers of Christ" are in truth "stewards of the mystery of God," surely this truly mysterious *mystery* of St. Paul's inspired statement must not be left out. We began our series of *μυστήρια* (in order of time) with "the mystery of godliness"—the Holy Incarnation of our blessed Lord. We end it with "*the mystery of lawlessness*," which, in the terrible description of its evil nature and influence, seems almost to amount to an incarnation of the Prince of Darkness.

I suppose we cannot be far wrong in identifying this pernicious influence, which was already at work when St. Paul wrote, with *Antichrist* (*ἀντιχρίστος*), mentioned in St. John's first and second Epistles (*vide* 1 John ii. 18, 22; iv. 3; 2 John 7). The two seem to correspond in several particulars:

1. First, both of these evil influences of opposition to all godliness were manifesting their baneful nature in the Apostolic period.

2. Secondly, both were evidently destined to grow, develop, and come to a final culminating power of hostile force.

3. Thirdly, of both we find that *lying* is a leading characteristic, and a direct opposition to Christ the crowning guilt.

4. Fourthly, in both descriptions we can see that the falsity of the system will be masked by great plausibility, against which the true believer needs earnest warning (*cf.* Matt. xxiv. 24; Mark xiii. 22, 23). Forewarned, forearmed.

5. Moreover, concerning both *Antichrist* and *lawlessness*, there is an indication that the final development will be a *personal* one.

In the ominous passage comprised in the first twelve verses of 2 Thes. ii. we read (ver. 8) that, when free scope is given for full development, "then shall be revealed *the lawless one* (*τότε ἀποκαλυφθήσεται ὁ ἄνομος*)—almost undoubtedly referring to a *person* representative of the final and most fatal form of

error, "whose coming is according to the working of Satan." But his career will apparently be brief, and certainly disastrous to himself, while glorious for the eventual triumph of Christ. It is assuredly declared that "the Lord Jesus shall slay him with the breath of His mouth, and bring him to nought with the manifestation of His coming (*ἐπιφάνεια τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ*).

We must refrain from attempting to set forth those signs of these times which seem to foreshadow the approach of this culmination of lawlessness. Our Lord's own express words forewarn us to be on the watch, and to read passing events in the light of plain prophetic indication. To many devout students of Holy Scripture, there are forces of upheaval and disruption now at work which are full of menace, and which are gaining increasing influence. But the subject is a vast one, and we shall be departing from the general purpose of this paper if we venture to enter into more explicit detail.

Surely the great consolation which the Church of Christ possesses is that, when times are darkest and disquietude most formidable, the return of Him for whom we look shall constitute a day-dawn, when all shadows shall flee away.

